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Original music: 'A worthwhile adventure'

RISCA

By Barbara Manville

It's not every day that you see a bunch of middle school band students blowing into glass bottles or whipping corrugated tubes as part of a musical performance.

But you'll see all that and more on March 17 when the Ponaganset Middle School Wind Ensemble performs "Escape From Chronopolis" at a school concert.

Now gearing up for the big debut, the Ponaganset Wind Ensemble will be performing the piece as part of its involvement with the Rhode Island Commissioning Project.

New this year, the project invites composers from all around the country to write commissioned compositions



REHEARSING for their upcoming performance of "Escape From Chronopolis," a piece of music which was written for them by composer Reber Clark of Tulsa, Okla., is the Ponaganset Middle School Wind Ensemble. (Observer photo by Barbara Manville)

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for school groups. Seven musical groups in the state are currently involved, six of them right here in North County. Ponaganset Middle School will be the first of the groups to perform its piece for the public.

Excited to be taking part, George Lessard, director of the Ponaganset Wind Ensemble, says this program has given the students a chance to experiment with new music and new sounds.

Some of the music, he admits, "is difficult to accept at first." But the students enjoy playing it, he says, and adds, "The kids are on the cutting edge."

According to composer Reber Clark, of Tulsa, Okla., who wrote "Escape From Chronopolis" specifically for the middle school group, the piece is based loosely on the story *Chronopolis* by J.G. Ballard, and represents a sort of rebellion against time.

This theme is reflected in part, he says, through rhythmic changes that take place in the music. For instance, the piece starts out with a rigid beat and then moves into an improvisational, almost chaotic segment with no beat at all, before returning in the end to the tick-

tock-like pulse of a clock.

Clark says he chose this theme because "kids, especially middle school kids, are so scheduled."

"They just never seem to have any time to be a kid and relax," he says.

Of the fact that the piece ends in a regimented beat, Clark says, "It kind of reminds them that you can't really escape time but you need to try."

Down-to-earth and easy to talk to, Clark, 37, described the reasoning behind his composition via phone - something he has been relying on frequently to communicate with Lessard and the Ponaganset group.

This weekend, however, he will travel to Rhode Island from his home in Oklahoma so he can work with the students in person during their final rehearsals.

And afterwards, he will head over to the North Smithfield High School, where he is working on a separate commissioned piece with students and Director Dennis St. Germain.

As part of the Rhode Island Commissioning Project, North Smithfield High School will be the next group to perform its piece on March 20.

Following, in March and April, will be performances by groups from Burrillville High School, Tiverton Middle School, Mount St. Charles Academy, Scituate High School, and the Rhode Island College Wind Ensemble and American Band.

The season will conclude with a "Festival of New American Music" on May 1 in Rhode Island College's Roberts Auditorium. All of the compositions will be featured in that performance.

Lessard, of Ponaganset, points out that funding for the Rhode Island Commissioning Project is provided in part by a grant from the New England Foundation for the Arts and Meet the Composer, Inc., with additional support from the Metropolitan Life Foundation, the Rhode Island State Council on the Arts and the Rhode Island College Performing and Fine Arts Commission.

Speaking for the Ponaganset Middle School group, Lessard also notes that the school is paying for a "small portion" of the costs.

"It's certainly a worthwhile adventure," he concludes.

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